



Effective Preaching

Part Four: Choosing Illustrations

Working with Jesus

iFOLLOW

The iFollow Discipleship Series

About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

Credits

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iFOLLOW

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Effective Preaching, Part Four: Choosing Illustrations

This is the fourth in a series of six units.

Learning Objectives

1. Get an idea of how to use illustrations in sermons
2. Become familiar with the art of storytelling in sermons
3. Discover how to find illustrations for sermons
4. Develop the skill of matching illustrations with key sermon points

Content Outline

1. Turn ideas into pictures
2. Types of illustrations
3. Illustrations help you connect
4. Four keys of storytelling
 - A. Cut the static
 - B. Make it live
 - C. Sharpen it
 - D. Aim for the heart
5. The four keys applied
6. Illustrate with a purpose
7. Match strength to strength
8. When to illustrate
9. Avoid leaky illustrations
10. Illustrating James 3:1-12
11. How to find illustrations
 - A. In life
 - B. In Scripture

Background Material for the Presenter

Illustrations are pictures in books that show what the book tells. They add force to its message. In a sermon, they serve the same goal but the medium has changed.



Instead of ink and paper, you have words and the listener's mind. You paint mental scenes with words.

In some cases, you will start from scratch. At other times, you can use an image already etched in their brain— instead of painting it fresh, your words bring it into focus. This works best with familiar scenes. Either way, your goal is to turn ideas into pictures.

Some readers will thrive on this notion. But, if you are not good with description, don't worry. Many stories and pictures are strong enough to live without your help. You can also borrow the talent of others, if you give credit.

"A writer for the Washington Post describes the event this way ..." Or, "C. S. Lewis tells the story of ..."

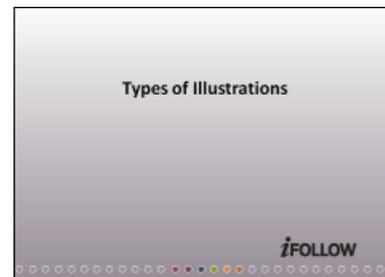
Even so, it is well worth the work to develop your own skills. You may discover a hidden talent or, at least, improve. Whatever you can do to make the story of the text live will increase impact and retention

Types of Illustrations

Before exploring how to paint good illustrations, we should consider the shapes they take. Most illustrations are stories but stories come in many forms. There are stories from your week, childhood stories, news stories, historical stories, celebrity stories, and others.

There is also common experience to draw from. "We all know what it's like to say the wrong thing at the wrong time." Or, "You know that feeling you get when blue lights start flashing in the rear view mirror? That's the feeling I got when I first read this text."

Quotes are another way to illustrate, adding authority or color to your message. Finally, other Scripture texts can clarify and reinforce the message of your anchor text.



Illustrations Help You Connect

Illustrating is about connecting. The first rule is, link eyes with your audience. That visual link helps them feel part of the sermon, and it helps you. When you are telling a story to real humans, instead of talking to your notes, social instincts kick in to make it natural.

Illustrations are the easiest part of your sermon to remember, making it easier to tell them without notes. If you would forget the illustration without notes, it's a poor one. If you

can't remember it, the audience sure won't. And, it won't work, either, if they go to sleep while you talk to your notes.

That is harsh. We should not say such things to a preacher. Do not fear, your audience will not sleep if you apply some keys for crafting illustrations that connect.



Four Keys of Storytelling

Since most illustrations are stories, let us focus here on crafting stories. However, keep in mind that all kinds of illustrations enhance the story of the text, giving these keys universal application.

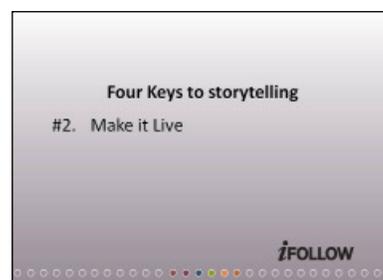
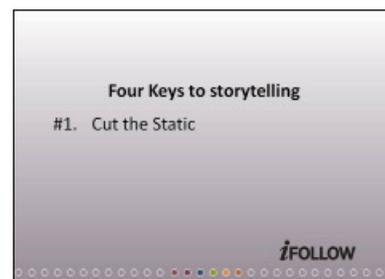
1. Cut the Static—The first key is to cut the static. Fine-tuning a story is like tuning your radio. You have to remove the “noise” that clutters the mind. How? First, write it down. Then, scratch out all the extra words. Be ruthless. Kill every word that slows speech. Next, scratch out all facts that don't move the storyline, no matter how interesting. In most cases, you will find that the story won't suffer. It may lose some of its color but you will see that it moves better, more like a stride and less like an amble.

2. Make it Live—The second key is to make it live. Put some color back in the story. Take a mental trip to the place it happened. Stand there and look around until it seems real. Notice the carpet and lampshades or mud floors and oil lamps. Only when you experience the story can you create that experience for others.

By cutting the static, you have stripped the story to its bones. Now, put some flesh back on it but don't put back the static. Add only what keeps the story at a stride. Build its muscle but don't make it fat. Anything that slows it down hinders the story and its power to illustrate.

One way to keep it moving is choosing colorful verbs and nouns instead of adjectives and adverbs. Take an example: “The little bird flew quickly past the window.” There is nothing wrong with the sentence but it lags. Say it aloud. It doesn't roll off the tongue right, does it? We can do better.

Cutting the adjective, “little,” and the adverb, “quickly,” speeds it up. We get, “The bird flew past the window.” Try the tongue test again. Smoother? Yes, but we lose some color. This is where colorful verbs and nouns can help. Replace “bird” with “finch” and “flew” with “shot”



and you get, “The finch shot past the window.” Much better. (These examples originated with Derek Morris, senior pastor at Forest Lake Church near Orlando, Florida, and adjunct professor of preaching at the Andrews University seminary.)

3. Sharpen It—The third key is to sharpen it. Identify the point of comparison between the idea you wish to illustrate and the illustration. Then, cut the facts that distract from it. It is OK if the story changes, as long as you are still telling the truth. Stories are only a snapshot of real life. By changing the story, you are just cropping the shot. To preserve the story of the text, you may have to sacrifice some elements of the illustrating stories, (like funny side notes, for example). That’s OK. Illuminating the text is what counts.

4. Aim for the Heart—The fourth key is to aim for the heart. Illustrations float best in a pool of tears—whether happy or sad. If facts were enough, you would need few illustrations. It is true that some illustrations clarify but most add heart to the sermon. Even macho men run on emotion. It might not be sappy emotion, but a rousing call to heroics or duty or indignation is also emotional. People decide with their hearts. We could debate the merits of this fact but it remains fact. Your sermon is powerless without a heart appeal. This was true even for Christ’s apostles (Acts 2:37).



The Four Keys Applied

We will “illustrate” each of these four keys with an old story. The story of Abraham Lincoln is complex but always told simply. Questions still swirl about his motives in fighting the Civil War. He made tactical blunders when the war started, but his story is told without this static so the true strength of his vision can emerge.

The best tellers of Lincoln’s story are Civil War historians and battlefield curators because they have “lived” in Lincoln’s world enough to make him live in ours, complete with hat and boots. The years of telling and retelling his story have sharpened it to such a point that every student knows his imprint on America.

But the reason for telling it is that it stirs the heart—to duty, to sacrifice, to love for something bigger than self. Well-told stories shape the world. However, story is not enough. In fact, “good illustrations” do not exist alone. They are only “good” if they illustrate your text well. (This formulation of thought belongs to Derek Morris.)



Illustrate with Purpose

Here is the story of a young mother who suddenly went blind. For twenty-six years, she suffered. She missed the change in each child's maturing face. She never saw her grandchildren. Such tragedy; then came more tragedy.

Medics rushed her to the hospital with a heart attack. Her organs were failing. She was lifeless. But, after hours of work, the doctors, with God's help, brought her back. And, wonder of wonders, after twenty-six years, her sight was back too. It was a medical miracle! This is the kind of story that, when you happen upon it, you want it for a sermon, but you must be cautious.

A story this powerful can actually destroy the sermon, if misapplied. It is dynamite but you don't want dynamite in the wrong place. If you wish to illustrate the point of James 3:1-12, "Wash the heart, not the mouth," this story will hurt the sermon.

Everyone will retain the story but miss the point of the text. A story about someone who overcame cursing through prayer may not be as dramatic but serves the sermon much better. Save the mother's story in a file until you find its fit.

It wasn't long before I found a place to use it. I was preparing to explain the book of Habakkuk to high school students when something clicked. In his book, Habakkuk asks two questions. Seeing how the innocent suffer at the hands of evil men, Habakkuk cries out to God, "Why do you tolerate wrong?" (Habakkuk 1:3). This is the same question that blind woman must have asked for twenty-six years; "why do I suffer and God does nothing?"

God answers Habakkuk with a promise to send Babylonian armies and punish Israel (1:6). That gives rise to a second question. How can God use worse people to correct Israel? (1:13). It's not fair. But God doesn't answer the fairness question. He just says it will work out (2:1-20). The book ends with Habakkuk's confession of faith.

In essence, he says, "It doesn't make sense but I trust you" (3:17-18). The blind woman certainly would not have asked for a heart attack—it wouldn't make sense—but it gave back her sight after 26 years. The woman's story strengthens the point that, though life seems unfair, God is trustworthy. That's Habakkuk in a nutshell.

Match Strength to Strength

Your strongest illustration should reinforce your main point. Listeners remember good



stories. Make sure the one they remember best is the one that drives home your main point, either the biblical answer or life application.

This does not mean you will only tell one story or use one illustration for each sermon. Just make the others less fantastic. They should be short and just enough to nail down one scene in the text before moving to the next. Make the force and length of each illustration equal to the weight of the point it serves.

When to Illustrate

By this time, you have enough information to build good illustrations. Now it's time you think of where to use them. Every good sermon starts in the listener's world, making a true-life story one of the best ways to raise the life question.

One creative option is that, with just the right story, you can tell it in two parts. To introduce the sermon, tell the perplexing part, the part that sparks the question. Then, when you have shared the biblical answer, tell the part that shows how this truth helped the main character. Or, use two separate stories to serve the same goals.

Use your strongest illustration for your sermon's conclusion and the second strongest for the introduction (except, of course, with a two-part story). The introduction is where you prove your sermon worth hearing and your conclusion is where you drive in its point. For both, you must capture the heart.

Other types of illustrations, like factoids, anecdotes, comparisons, statistics, and the like, may also capture the heart. But, most of these have less impact and work best for illustrating scenes in the text flow. Don't illustrate points smaller than the major scenes, or sermon movements. A good sermon will have at least one and no more than six illustrations.

In summary, there are three spots for illustrations: to introduce the life question, to encapsulate the building blocks that lead to the biblical answer, and to drive the main point through the heart.

Avoid Leaky Illustrations

The most important rule to remember is that illustrations are a communication device, a medium through which we funnel a message. Their ability to funnel the message is their one test of value.



Children sometimes communicate secret messages with cans and string. The tension in the string carries the vibrations of their voices from one can to the other.

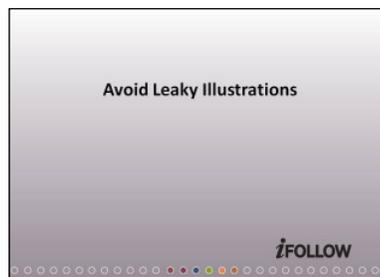
Older children, if they live in a house with the right kind of construction, may find an improved channel of communication by speaking into the heater vents at opposite ends of the house. The heating ducts carry their voices without the bother of wind or broken strings.

There is one problem. If they send covert, after bedtime voice messages from one end of the house to the other, those words escape to the vents in other rooms, including the ones with parents in them. So much for stealth. . .

Although cans with string is a lesser device than heater vents, the vents allow the message to leak out and defeats the purpose. Remember the lesson of the heater vents when choosing your illustrations. Don't look for the best story but the best illustration of the biblical point. Keep your purpose in mind.

Illustrating James 3:1-12

As an example, let us illustrate James 3:1-12. This text carries its own illustrations, in the form of metaphors (ships, fire, et cetera). They encapsulate the scenes of the story but they are far from the listener's world. Although understandable in today's world, most listeners don't live with ships or forest fires. We can use them for clarity but we must start and end in the listener's world with stories close to their heart.



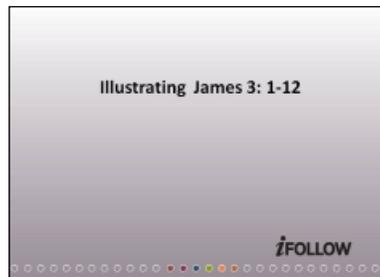
The life question is, "How can I clean up my speech?" The best illustration to raise this question is the most direct. Find a story about someone who struggled to stop cursing others. Better yet, tell on yourself. No doubt you have stumbled in speech.

The biblical answer is, "Cleanse the heart, not the mouth." The best illustration for this concept is a story of someone's changed heart that changed their speech. If you can't dig up a story that direct, find one that shows how a changed heart kicked another habit. The real point is that you can't change yourself; God must change you. If you illustrate this concept, you can explain how it applies to speech.

How to Find Illustrations

We have learned why, how, and where to use illustrations. One task remains—finding them—a task that intimidates every new preacher. There's good news: illustrations are everywhere. Having good ones comes from seeing them more than finding them.

1. Look for Them in Life—You can learn to see illustrations with a simple practice. Carry a palm-sized notepad, index cards, or a small recorder. Whenever something interesting happens to you, think of what it illustrates and record it. Do the same with interesting news stories, quotes, movie scenes, memories, or whatever you experience in life. Some preachers will tell you that their best illustrations come from childhood memories or the news. It might seem hard at first but you will soon have more illustrations than you can use. Organize them into file folders on your computer (or the old fashioned way) so you have them when you need them.

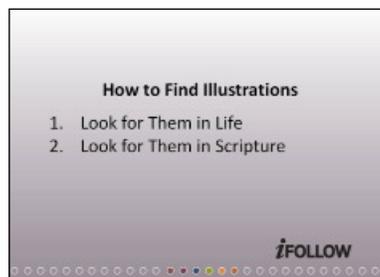


2. Look for Them in Scripture—Illustrating your text with other Bible texts is more complex. It is still wise to keep track of insights you find through personal study (like you would daily experiences) but there is more. First, only use illustrating texts that you have studied. Misused texts weaken your message. Second, don't use more than six illustrating texts. Too many will splinter the sermon's punch. You can find the right texts with a concordance, through cross-references in your Bible, or with software.

Today we have learned that illustrations help us connect with our listeners, we've become familiar with the art of storytelling, we've discovered how to find great illustrations, and we've seen how matching illustrations can nail down the key sermon points. We are well on our way to becoming great preachers.

Handouts in this Package

1. Four Keys to Storytelling
2. Do It Yourself



Additional Resources

Bresee, W. Floyd (1997). *Successful Lay Preaching*. Silver Spring, MD: The Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

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Discussion Questions

1. Share a time in your life when a story moved you as nothing else would have. Why do you think stories have such power over us?
2. What were some of the ways Jesus used stories and other illustrations?
3. Was there ever a time when you listened to a sermon which had good facts and was Bible-based, but had no stories or illustrations? What was your response to this sermon?
4. Can you think of a time when the story told in a sermon didn't connect with the content, so that what you remember now is the story, but not the point of the presentation?
5. Can you think of three illustrations from this day of your life?

Group Activity

Purpose: This two-part exercise will allow participants to collect some story material, and also to share it with each other.

Preparation: Collect a large pile of magazines and newspapers and bring it to the session. You may ask participants to bring some, too. You will need large tables, enough poster boards (half-size boards may be enough) for each person to have one, scissors, glue, and markers.

Assignment: Divide participants in groups around tables. In this case, the groups can be fairly large, so long as they have room to work. They should also be diverse – different ages, genders, and personalities at each table. Have participants comb through the resources and cut out pictures, news briefs, headlines, letters in advice columns, cartoons, anything and everything that sparks an idea for a sermon illustration in their minds. They may share and will likely chatter, laugh, and spark many more ideas off each other than anyone would have found alone.

Next, have each one take the poster board and create a collage of a few illustrations that could be used to illustrate their Anchor Texts. With these stories, it is likely no longer possible to do a three minute sermon, though some may try if they wish. But do allow time for those who wish to share a couple of minutes about their boards and how they'll use these illustrations when they make their full-length sermons.

Time: Within an hour or hour and a half, the more time you have for this kind of exercise, the better. Allow at least 15 minutes at the tables, digging and cutting, at least 10 for making the collage, and then a few minutes for sharing, and if possible, some for general sharing of impressions and insights.

Handout 1

Four Keys of Storytelling

Since most illustrations are stories, we focus here on crafting stories. However, keep in mind that all illustration types enhance the story of the text, giving these keys universal application.

1. Cut the static

The first key is to cut the static. Fine-tuning a story is like tuning your radio. You have to remove the “noise” that clutters the mind. How? First, write it down. Then, scratch out all the extra words. Be ruthless. Kill every word that slows speech.

Next, scratch out all facts that don’t move the storyline, no matter how interesting. In most cases, you will find that the story won’t suffer. It may lose some of its color but you will see that it moves better—more like a stride and less like an amble.

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The second key is to make it live. Put some color back in the story. Take a mental trip to the place it happened. Stand there and look around until it seems real. Notice the carpet and lampshades or mud floors and oil lamps. Only when you experience the story can you create that experience for others.

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The fourth key is to aim for the heart. Illustrations float best in a pool of tears—whether happy or sad. If facts were enough, you would need few illustrations. It is true that some illustrations clarify but most add heart to the sermon.

Even macho men run on emotion. It might not be sappy emotion, but a rousing call to heroics or duty or indignation is also emotional. People decide with their hearts. We could debate the merits of this fact but it remains fact. Your sermon is powerless without a heart appeal. This was true even for Christ's apostles (Acts 2:37).

Handout 2

Do It Yourself

Spend the next two days collecting illustrations from life and Scripture that you think will make good sermon illustrations. Anything goes. Read the news, listen to people, or review your childhood memories. Something good will surface. As a last resort, read a book of collected stories. But, don't reuse popular stories—the audience is vaccinated against them. (Also always give credit where credit is due.) The right illustrations are close by. With time, you will learn to see them. Just look.

This handout will guide you through choosing some of these stories, taking the sermon outline you made and seeing what fits and how to fit it. You might be surprised how much does fit.

One Creative Option

With just the right story, you can tell it in two parts. To introduce the sermon and introduce the life question, tell the perplexing part—the part that sparks the question. Then, when you have shared the biblical answer, tell the part that shows how this truth helped the main character. Or, use two separate stories to serve the same goals.

Try it: Find several different stories that could illustrate the anchor text you are working on now.

Introduction vs. Conclusion

Use your strongest illustration for your sermon's conclusion and the second strongest for the introduction (except, of course, with a two-part story). The introduction is where you prove your sermon worth hearing and your conclusion is where you drive in its point. For both, you must capture the heart.

Try it: Choose which of your found stories will work best for your introduction and conclusion.

Small Building Blocks Throughout

Other types of illustrations, like factoids, anecdotes, comparisons, statistics, and the like, may also capture the heart. But, most of these have less impact and work best for illustrating scenes in the text flow. Don't illustrate points smaller than the major

scenes, or sermon movements. A good sermon will have at least one and no more than six illustrations.

Try it: Can you pick out some small anecdotes or factoids that would make an inviting path throughout your sermon to its heartfelt conclusion?

Summary

There are three spots for illustrations:

1. To introduce the life question
2. To encapsulate the building blocks that lead to the biblical answer
3. To drive the main point through the heart

Try it: Create a final lineup of your second-strongest story (or half a two-parter) at the beginning, some small ones scattered throughout, and the best one of all (conclusion of the two-parter) as the grand finale. Integrate this story lineup into the outline you have made.